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ABSTRACT

Opening in 1981 to moviegoers in Japan, France, and the United States, "The Gods Must Be Crazy" became an international hit. Set in Botswana, the film covers a relatively small geographic area yet nevertheless can open classroom discussions about how many cultures and how much cultural diversity can exist in a small area. It has three main groups of characters: (1) a tribe of simple and unpretentious bushmen, hunting and gathering natives who live in the Kalahari desert; (2) 600 miles to the south, there is a city where a modern newspaper office employs men and women of different races; and (3) in still another setting, there are revolutionaries--black Africans in military-type outfits. According to good dramatic writing, these three groups will meet at some point in the movie: each group has goals which conflict with those of the other groups. What does the film tell us about intercultural communication? For one thing, the viewer sees these different groups in a limited geographical region--a picture of Africa that runs contrary to stereotypes. Any "all" statement about these African scenes will have no validity. Not only is the viewer unable to make any "all" statements about Africans, but he or she is also unable to make any "all" statement about a particular country in Africa. Charges that the film is racist have been laid to rest by critics and writers such as Tim O'Brien, who notes that the humor of the film is at everyone's expense. (TB)

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Using the movie,

"The Gods Must Be Crazy,"

in Interpersonal Communications Classes

by

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The Gods Must Be Crazy

Any discussion about a culture usually starts with assumptions we make about that culture. Any discussion about Africa will be shaded by our assumptions. We draw into our mind's eye pictures, words and sounds, images and soon we have a view of Africa. We've made our assumptions.

How did we develop our assumptions about Africa? How many Tarzan movies, documentaries and TV specials shaped the look of Africa in our mind's eye? How many recordings, concerts and soloists gave us the sound of Africa? And, the books, how many books taught us something else about Africa? How were the pictures and stories reinforced by music, news stories and bits of reality that came our way.

My father was stationed in Africa during World War II. How disappointed I was when I learned it was not the Africa of lions, tigers and elephants, but northern Africa -- a very different assumption.

As we matured we became more and more aware of Africa and the assumptions became glamorous, sad, racist, intellectual, cruel. A little of all and so much more.

Frankly, that's the way things are. And, we have to start with our assumptions in order to move forward into something that may be closer to correct. We have to start with our assumptions in order to teach, learn intercultural communication.

"The Gods Must Be Crazy" opened in 1981 and movie goers in Japan, France and the United States made this South African film a major box-office success and an international hit.

The film is set in Botswana. The film depicts some of my, your, own basic assumptions about Africa. The film may also force me to wrestle with one bit of information -- Africa is the second largest continent. Yet, most of us think of Africa as a big, sweaty Tarzan movie. We a assume everyone in Africa knows everyone else there. Of course, with a little rational thought we know we've made the wrong assumptions.

"The Gods Must be Crazy" covers a relatively small geographical area. Yet, the film opens discussions about how many cultures and how much cultural diversity can exist in that small geographical area.

The movie has three groups of characters.

The first group of characters is a tribe of bushmen, primitive natives who live in the Kalahari desert. Dressed in loin cloths, they find water by collecting dew and harvesting water from certain plants. They capture and kill only enough animals to feed themselves. They are simple, kind, unpretentious.

Only six hundred miles south of these primitive natives is a sophisticated city. The camera focuses on the office of a modern newspaper. In the newsroom the writers work at computers and talk on telephones. The staff is integrated -- men and women and black and white. This is a far cry from their countrymen/women only six hundred miles to the north.

And, in another setting, we meet a group of revolutionaries. These black Africans are dressed in a military type outfit. They want revolution.

According to good dramatic writing, these three groups will meet at some point in the movie. Each group has goals and those goals conflict with the other groups. That meeting three groups will probably be the climax of the movie or will precede the climax.

The primitive tribe is puzzled by the gods. They fly overhead and leave a trail of white behind them -- probably a stomach problem. One day, a minor god, toss a Coca-Cola bottle out of an airplane. The Bushmen think that bottle must be a gift from the gods. But this glass icon brought with it the compulsions of civilization: greed, jealousy, rancor. So the family patriarch determined to take the bottle to the end of the world and drop it off. On his journey he saw the strangest things: beasts with round legs -- jeeps; and a female with strange skins on her back (the village schoolteacher) and a squad of shiftless African guerrillas.

How many other movies have a character go in search of something? In this film, the search leads our bushman into different cultures. And, we see him push his culture up against other cultures.

Kate, white woman in the newspaper offices, says she's had enough big city pressures and takes a job as a school teacher for one of the tribes. And, she goes off in search of a different life. She becomes involved in the comic and the romantic plots. We know from the moment a shy Ph.D. candidate who is doing research on animal dung in Africa -- from the moment he's sent to the bus stop to get her that romance will find a way. The fact that he's sent by the local priest in the priest's jeep makes romance a sure bet. The jeep runs so poorly and causes the priest so much trouble, that the priest has named it "Anti-Christ."

The revolutionaries bumble and bungle their way through a pseudo revolution. At the end they have captured Kate and her 30 students. The revolutionaries bumble so badly they can't get the children to walk in a circle toward the revolutionaries' camp. So, they compromise and let the children walk in a square to the camp.

These revolutionaries would rather play cards than fight. They aren't very good at being revolutionaries but they continue searching for a new life.

Let's look at some of the scenes. [At this point the audience views scenes from the movie.]

What does this tell us about intercultural communication. We only have to see this film to see three different cultures within a limited geographical region. They speak different languages, dress differently and have different customs. Also, we might underscore here that any ***all*** statement will have no validity. Not only can we not make any **all** statements about Africans, we can't narrow the **all** statement to include only one country. If we're to learn anything about intercultural communication from this film it may be that these people may live in a geography but they are very different than each other.

Unfortunately, the film doesn't give us the background we need to deal with the cultural differences. The most important people do not have roles in the film. From the film, we know nothing about the writers, producers and directors. Or, maybe I should say that from the film we know everything about the writers, producers and directors.

We do know that film making is a collaborative art. Those involved much create, compromise, suggest, compromise, forget and compromise. The production team forms an umbrella that covers the film or, if you will, a foundation under the film. We see the story through several sets of eyes -- the writers, the producers and the directors. And, that information is -- of course, it is never provided in the film.

Yet, the critics and the feature writers brought "The Gods Must Be Crazy" production crew to us in a variety of articles. Fortunately, for us, Jamie Uys (Ace) is the writer director and producer. So, we only have to see this film through one pair of eyes.

And, therein, lies a danger. The critics note Uys' paternalistic attitude toward the Bushmen. In October 1984, "The Gods Must Be Crazy" was the longest running movie at a New York first-run theater. The film had box-office success despite protests at the theater.

Tim O'Brien, the regular movie critic for *Commonweal* wrote, "There have been charges (and picketing) claiming that "The Gods Must Be Crazy" is racist. True, it was produced in South Africa; true, it reflects that nation's power structure, with white hunters, teachers and biologist and black tribesmen, hunters, and, at best, mechanics. But the humor is pretty much at everyone expense, and the bushman, who brings sweetness and light wherever he goes, comes off best of all. The film isn't racist, but primitive; its hero played by Kalahari native (n!xaw) is a stone age Charlie Chaplin, whose benign wisdom subtly underlines the craziness of the technologically superior "gods" around him."

Vince Canby, the movie reviewer for the NYT, wrote, ""The Gods Must Be Crazy' is so genial, so good-natured and, on occasion, so inventive in its slapstick routines, that it would seem to deny the existence of any racial problems anywhere. It is an ingenious piece of South African propaganda, subtly designed to subvert the effect of the impassioned, anti-apartheid literature that is coming out of South Africa."

This underscores a major problem in attempting to teach anything about a culture from a film. We have to consider the writers, the directors and the producers. They limit the film, they shape the film, and, in the last editing, give us the view of the world. They create for us a romantic, fulfilled movie. All of the characters are lovable

and charming -- except the revolutionaries -- and there is a wonderful marriage of the three stooges and the Marx Brothers in the revolutionaries.

The Gods Must Be Crazy to drop a Coca-Cola bottle on a tribe of bushmen. We must avoid being equally crazy when we attempt to draw profound assumptions about a culture from a movie.

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